

Labor's Constant Struggle Upward

By HAROLD T. CHASE

THE man with whom I was talking was young, in the early 30's, yet though young was not an optimist. The world did not look rose-colored as he saw it. He was a fighter—for the labor union. Perhaps because he was more aggressive, more radical, more bitter than most, he had been chosen to represent and fight for them; he was editor of a publication they got out. We were both seated and he was looking me in the eye, not a kindly look, though we were friendly enough.

"Production," he protested, repeating with scorn the word I had been emphasizing. "Produce more, work harder, toil and sweat. That's what they are saying. They want us to put our shoulder to the wheel, their wheel, for them. If we produce more, do they pay more?"

He laughed, looking away, reflectively. It was a laugh without mirth, a jeer, rather.

"But you must get your wages out of what you produce; produce more and there is more for the wage fund. There is no other way."

"Yes; that's what they say. They're all saying it, and now the press is saying it. They control the press. All bunkum! We know that we produce and they get it, and pay us—what?"

He looked sharply back at me; then continued:

"Why, they pay us without any regard to what we produce, but according to the demand and supply of labor. We are a commodity, like any other thing. You remember Shylock's speech," he said after a pause. "Hath not a workingman eyes? If you prick him doth he not bleed? Congress passed a law declaring that labor is not a commodity. But what does capitalism care about laws?"

"Yet you can't dispute the fact," I answered. "The analysis of production shows that if the whole product went to labor, if all the interest and profit and rent that go to capital were taken from it and added to labor's share, wages on the whole would go up only about 25 per cent. And yet your wages in 50 years, or in 20, have gone up perhaps 50 per cent. How is that? Greater production—there is no other way. Soviet Russia gives it all to the worker. Yet what does he get? It is a matter of maximum production."

He rose. I had been trying to convince him that if labor dropped its policy of restricted output and went in for maximum production, wages could at no distant time advance not 25 per cent but 100, perhaps 200 per cent, with increased production, improved machinery, better processes, many suggested by labor itself out of its daily experience with machines, there was no known limit to the height to which wages might rise. And yet capital would profit more. In fact, the relative improvement of labor's condition had been due to such advances in production, hampered as they had been by restriction, on the part not only of labor but of capital also, which in times past had been less intelligent than now in its attitude toward inventions. For capital itself had been known to restrict output by buying up and scrapping inventions, instead of adopting them readily and so scrapping old machinery. But capital had learned the lesson, and it was now for labor to learn it. Modern capital never hesitates to scrap machinery, if a new and better process is offered.

He turned as he went out.

"Look it up," he said. "Read the history of labor. This country isn't old enough. Get any responsible account of English industrial and economic history, since the time of the Henrys. We have read them and we know. You talk as if labor's rise has been regular and steady. Look up the facts."

With that he left me.

One who "looks up the facts," is somewhat startled by one or two of them. Labor's rise has not been a steady, evolutionary process. Rather it has been tidal, ebb and flow, rise and decline. It has come up, and then fallen again. And this process has repeated itself, four or five times in three or four centuries.

FROM the laborer's point of view industrial history may be said to take its start with abolition of slavery or serfdom. And in this sense England has had, roughly, six centuries of industrial history. Prior to the breakup of villeinage, the ultimate vestige of medievalism and of the feudal system, labor was attached to the land and employers were landowners almost exclusively. And in fact even after villeinage passed out, under the third Henry of England, holders of the land comprised both employers, almost wholly, and magistrates. The latter is of importance because in England wages for a long period, after Elizabeth's law, were fixed and determined by the magistrates or

justices. The employer, in a word, determined the wage and it had the sanction of law. Laborers refusing to work at the fixed rate were subject to severe penalties under the law, including not only imprisonment but mutilation, and in extreme instances, death.

If we go back a little of the abolishment of villeinage, or the system under which the laborer "rendered service" and was paid for his labor in kind and keep, not receiving money wages, we find a point of demarcation in regard to labor's condition in England in the Great Plague of 1348. This visitation fell upon the British Isles from southern Europe and wreaked a fearful harvest of lives. Sections of England were almost depopulated. The immediate effect of the Great Plague was such a diminution of laborers that a sharp rise of wages ensued, averaging some 50 per cent in the year following for carpenters and masons as well as for agricultural labor. Says Henry DeB. Gibbons in his "Industrial History of England":

"It seems the upper classes and the capitalists of that day very strongly objected to paying high wages, as they naturally do. The King himself felt deeply upon the point. Without waiting for Parliament to meet, Edward III issued a proclamation ordering that no man should either demand or pay the higher rates of wages, but should abide by the old rate . . . Parliament assembled in 1349 and eagerly ratified this proclamation in the laws known as the Statutes of Laborers."

But wages rose nevertheless, ignoring statutes, as economic laws have a fashion of doing.

Labor, then, for the first time, acquired a sense of power and worth. There were born within it the consciousness and the impulses of dignity which have ever since extended and grown. The new labor consciousness seethed and took form among the working masses. Yet it was a full generation before it burst forth in revolt.

Thirty-five years after the Great Plague, in 1383, labor rose in the famous Wat Tyler Rebellion, or the Peasants' Revolt. They marched upon London in a threatening horde and exacted from the frightened Richard II the pledge that they should be freed from villeinage, from a labor of service and serfdom. On this royal promise they dispersed. Richard broke his word, but the peasants' revolt sealed the end of serfdom just the same. At the close of the century a few years later "food was cheap and abundant; wages were amply sufficient." Indeed the years following the abolition of villeinage were the Golden Age of the English laborer. Artisans earned 3 shillings a week, "which," says Gibbons, "would certainly be worth more than 30 shillings a week at present" (1890).

If so, then the English laborer of the year 1400 was in better condition, his economic and industrial status was superior, than in 1890. For in the latter year Sir Robert Giffen, the distinguished English economist estimated average wages in England at 24 shillings and sevenpence a week. Living in 1400 was

is, they were established legally by the magistrates. Under the assessments Prof. Thorold Rogers showed that it required more than 40 weeks to earn the provision for his maintenance which in 1495 the laborer could earn by 15 weeks' labor. His condition continued to decline, and in 1725 a whole year's labor could obtain for him no more food and provision than 15 weeks in 1495.

After 1750 and until the Napoleonic Wars and the Industrial Revolution, that is, the great transition from industry conducted in the home to the system of factory production by machinery and steam, there was an improvement, the first marked upward trend since the time of Henry VIII.

COMING contemporaneously with the chronic misery of the period of the French Wars, the Industrial Revolution struck labor down. Stripped of its traditional livelihood, driven from domestic industry to the new factory, its skill of artisanship nullified almost at a stroke, labor suffered during the years of the transition a degradation not to be described. The revolution in manufactures, although debasing labor, yet enriched the capitalist and increased the wealth of England tenfold. It was a period, like the wars, of extortion and avarice unparalleled up to that time. And so began, and by such woeful conditions is to be understood, the vindictive and for long uncompromising contest of labor against machinery. It had stolen his trade and debased his class. Shortly before this decisive event of the breakup of domestic industry there occurred, at the close of the eighteenth century, an historic struggle over wages in the Glasgow cotton industry. At length the magistrates fixed the wage. But the employers rejected it. Then 40,000 handweavers went out on strike. The industrial warfare came to an end by the arrest and imprisonment of the strike leaders, but the episode had far-reaching consequences, Parliament taking note of it by passing the acts of 1799 and 1800 prohibiting labor combination in toto. As early as 1720 there had been laws forbidding labor to combine to raise wages.

Wages declined and the status of labor deteriorated under these drastic statutes and the power of employers. Weavers' wages fell from 17 shillings a week in 1824 to 9 shillings in 1829. But this decline was the death blow to the laws prohibiting combinations of labor to raise wages. The laws were repealed and the age of labor organization dawned.

For the last 90 years, therefore, in England, and for the greater part of that time in America, the struggle of labor to advance has been conducted in general through organization. Labor, not ignorant of its own long history, has been under the tradition of the "class struggle." It is familiar with these events. For six hundred years it has chafed under employer-made laws and systems. Not easily is it to be convinced of the good will of employers. And not easily is it to be persuaded that rather by maximum labor, maximum production, than by the methods of the union, of war or of the armed truce, is labor's as well as employer's and consumer's true welfare to be furthered.

Yet is there any other true solution? Maximum production alone offers such a quantity of goods that there is enough to afford full profits to employers, higher wages to labor, yet reduced prices to consumer.

Perhaps it is rather up to the capitalist and employer. Those factories today, and they are almost daily increasing in number, which

have seen a great light and have introduced through forms of representation of labor in the shop some sort of democratism in industry, have found labor responsive and the invading labor agitator checkmated. In such factories if more is produced there is more in the pay envelope. The worker who before kept the idea to himself if he discovered by daily contact with his machine some practical means of improvement of machine or process and consequent increased production, now, in such factories, brings his idea to the employer. The spirit of the class conflict breaks down, gives way to new belief in a common interest and the sense of partnership.

But unless, promptly, there is more pay in the envelope when output increases, the co-operative attitude of labor can as well be despaired of. He will not produce more, work and sweat harder, for the mere greater profit of the employer. Rather he will abide by his principle of restricted output. And who shall blame him?

It is not a question simply of a more equitable division for equity's sake. The greater object is to bring about a mutual, common and universal exertion of energies and faculties for a vastly greater production.

IN THIS article Mr. Chase gives a very interesting history of labor's struggles for a half century, from the time labor worked in England for two shillings a week to the present. Summing up his arguments they force the conclusion that the employer who wants to cope with the Union can do so only by offering something better (for labor) than the Union offers.

obviously much simpler. And from that date Gibbons notes that "prosperity was progressive and continuous till the evil days of Henry VIII," a period of a century and a half.

That this period was labor's Golden Age appears not only from what preceded but from what followed. The whole of the two centuries following the eighth Henry, or up to approximately 1750, "show a steady deterioration," says the same historian, "in the lot of the English laborer and artisan."

In 1564, in the midst of Elizabeth's reign of glory, wages of artisans were about 3 shillings a week and of laborers 2 shillings. At this period pauperism had its beginnings in England and there began, to continue until near the middle of the 19th century, the policy known as the Poor Laws. These provided a tax rate for the relief of paupers, initiated in the reign of Elizabeth and not abolished until 1812 and in principle continued until 1835. Its effect was to maintain wages at a minimum, since the employer knew that if his wages would not maintain the laborer, the public would eke out his living by the tax. Under Elizabeth, also, laws were passed for the "assessment of wages"; that